The New York Review Of Books
26 February 1970

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P-Uris, Leon
P-Truffaut
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It's Only a Movie!

Hitchcock
by François Truffaut.
Simon & Schuster, 256 pp., $10.00; $3.75 (paper)

Topaz
directed by Alfred Hitchcock.
Universal Pictures

Robert Mazzocco

We all know, I suppose, the compound character of Alfred Hitchcock's art. The sinister young man, for instance, outwardly affable: Robert Walker, in *Strangers on a Train*, with his expensive cuff links and strangler's hands; gangling Anthony Perkins, in *Psycho*, motel keeper and schizophrenic. Or the theme of pursuit, neither burlesqued as in *Pale Fire*, nor magisterial as in *Les Misérables*, but both magisterial and burlesqued; the coupling of catastrophe with charm, the ghoulish with dreams:

The sleeping Hangman ties the Fatal Noose,
Nor unsuccessful waits for dead Men's Shoes . . .

These arrangements, and others, make or give one, I think, a feeling of companionable terror. Sitting in the theater, the spectator suffers gladly, watching "the rising curve of interest," Hitchcock's term, like a bolt sliding across the door, keeping him there.

Few things, certainly, are more pleasurable than having the hair on one's head stood on edge, so long as we sense we're in no danger. De Quincey a century ago suggested we consider murder as one of the fine arts. With Hitchcock, so much the master of his audiences (in the François Truffaut book, speaking of *Psycho*, he remarks: "I was directing the viewers. You might say I was playing them, like an organ"), every shudder casts a spell. Think of the tracking sequence in *Notorious*, a favorite of Truffaut's, the smooth, sumptuous swing of the camera traveling from the chandelier above a glittering hall to the close-up of the key clasped in Ingrid Bergman's hand ("There's a large reception being held in this house," Hitchcock explains, "but there is a drama here which no one is aware of, and at the core of that drama is this tiny object, this key"); the glass of milk, with its perhaps fatal dosage, in *Suspicion* ("I put a light right inside the glass because I wanted it to be luminous. Cary Grant's walking up the stairs and everyone's attention had to be focused on that glass").

Hitchcock, of course, is the *amateur*, the prop man of psychology, often unashamedly so; he hates "the plausibles," the wearying psychological explanation, but adores props, and out of these he creates his situations or emotions: "Nowadays. I use magnified props in many pictures." His objects, his "gimmicks," as he calls them, are there not for reasons of ideology (analogues of modern alienation) or of *hommage* (quotations from other films), as they are in the works of Jean-Luc Godard.

In Hitchcock, with his spirited decisions and affected concealments, his twistings and turnings of plot that are disentangled or even more entangled in a matter of seconds, there are no essayistic ploys, only narrative ones. The guilt, the mystery, in the director's dauntingly old-fashioned story-telling way, are always attached to a concrete circumstance (the razor in *Spellbound*, the name rubbed off the window pane in *The Lady Vanishes*) or to a gesture (the italicized image of the finger on the telephone in *Dial M for Murder*).

Hitchcock has an omnific eye. In conversations with Truffaut, he speaks knowingly of Rouault and Cézanne; he has read Eisenstein and Pudovkin on montage; German expressionism and Murnau were early influences; he began his career drawing narrative titles for Famous Players, and he has, in a sense, been "filling out the tapestry" ever since.

In *The Paradine Case*, when Gregory Peck visits the manor house of Valli, the sedate film unexpectedly blossoms with a Wagnerian scented interest in the atmospheric and the artificial; the bizarre, spacious, manipulative bedroom suggests the presence of the absent *femme fatale*, the camera looking at things elliptically or slyly, then expertly picking through the inessentials, heightening what really matters, placing you, like Conrad, in the center of the *mise-en-scène*.

Here, as they always do, suspicion and sensuality mix (helped, too, by the Franz Waxman score; Hitchcock, acutely aware of textures and tones, seems dependent on composers as on photographers, and often uses, in both cases, the same ones), and Peck, the stuffy barrister, returns to London, his skepticism allayed and his doom sealed. The usual rhythm of a Hitchcock film is very catchy, very selective, now and then, as in syncopation, shifting the regular beat, using or eliminating, as Hitchcock says, "one idea after another"; a series of step by step, blandly underplayed, occasionally overly complex, but always vividly pictorial statements, full of those condensed moments that simplify everything, including the horrific, so it strikes instantly, whether allegorical (clouds of black smoke filling the screen as the train carrying Joseph Cotten, the lady-killer of *Shadow of a Doubt*, enters the station), or merely Grand Guignol (the garish, grinning skeleton of the old woman, in *Psycho*, spinning round and round in her chair).

From *The Lodger*, made in 1926, with Ivor Novello as Jack the Ripper, at least until the last reel (the trouble with the star system, confesses Hitchcock to Truffaut, is that the star always has to turn out to be innocent: "Cary Grant could not play a murderer"), to *Topaz*, recently released (spies and skullduggery and the Cuban missile crisis good, but a bit grim, and when not that, a bit glossy), all of the major Hitchcock efforts have been tales more or less told in the same wry, dry, elegantly cater-cornered, casually cosmopolitan manner, both oddly sardonic (the homey jab, the slightly noxious wit—isn't Hitchcock, the humorist, a sort of cold mutton English Lubitsch?) and oddly erotic ("An English girl, looking like a school teacher, is apt to get into a cab with you, and, to your surprise, she'll probably pull a man's pants open"). The settings are as prosaic as Santa Rosa, as lush as Marrakech or Cannes, where the most delectable quality, no doubt, is that Hitchcockian talent of aggravating, and then soothing. "The skillful writer," says Johnson, echoing Horace, "*irritat, mulcet*." Hitchcock, though he can at times artistically, if not thematically, vary to a surprising degree, has always been, in whole or in part, nearly flawless in that audience-pleasing way.

François Truffaut, an eloquent fan, offers us, in the introductory essay to his book, a rather different sketch.

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